

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 907

RC 021 461

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TITLE Including Rural Districts in Inclusive Staff Development.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Coming Together: Preparing for Rural Special Education in the 21st Century. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (18th, Charleston, SC, March 25-28, 1998); see RC 021 434.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Inclusive Schools; *Inservice Teacher Education; Intermediate Administrative Units; Mainstreaming; Regional Cooperation; *Regional Planning; Regular and Special Education Relationship; *Rural Schools; *Shared Resources and Services; Special Education; *Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS *Texas (Panhandle)

ABSTRACT

Teaching students who receive special education services in integrated settings requires intensive staff development and on-going training. Region 16 Education Service Center in the Texas panhandle serves 65 rural school districts covering 25,000 square miles and 80,000 students. In 1996, with direction and funding from the state legislature, Region 16 began to develop a regional plan for staff development on inclusion. Focus groups and an outside consultant identified issues, services, and products needed, and suggested changes in services to support diverse learners in inclusive settings. A needs assessment survey sent to appropriate personnel ranked needs, changes, and service delivery. Survey results indicated that the preferred service delivery model was training at "cluster sites" selected to minimize participant travel time. A series of training sessions held at sites in 1996 and 1997 included topics on meeting the needs of diverse learners; support models for inclusive education; support, staff, and scheduling; IEP process; strategies for handling behavior issues; and creative solutions to barriers in inclusive education. The next component of Region 16's plan involved identifying demonstration sites that would receive technical assistance. Other components included administrative seminars, creation of a video library, and training of a team of inclusion resource experts. Additional types of support included a newsletter, half-day training sessions, and other training opportunities. Evaluation of the regional plan emphasized determination of the extent to which students with disabilities were being served in integrated settings. A demonstration site faculty survey and a statistical look at campus-level changes in student placement and use of personnel yielded very positive results, which were attributed to the impact of cluster site training. (SAS)

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INCLUDING RURAL DISTRICTS IN INCLUSIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Educating students receiving special education services in integrated settings is an outcome that requires intensive staff development and on-going training. When considering how to assist campus staff in becoming knowledgeable and comfortable with inclusive practices, King-Sears (1997) states there are four foundational components necessary for inclusion to succeed. These are (a) shared vision, (b) information about the change process, (c) preparation, and (d) on-going support (p. 3). She also states, "Preparation and ongoing support are intertwined; one should not occur without the other" (p. 4). Recommendations such as these helped shape the staff development offered on inclusive practices to the rural districts in the Texas Panhandle.

Introduction

Region 16 Education Service Center (ESC), centrally located in the Texas Panhandle, is one of 20 ESCs in Texas. Services to 65 school districts in 26 counties covering 25,500 square miles are provided by Region 16. Average daily attendance for all 65 school districts is approximately 80,000 students. Amarillo, Region 16's headquarters, has the largest school district with over 30,000 students, while the smallest district serves fewer than 30 students. The Region 16 service area is large and rural. For example, the district farthest from Region 16 is 150 miles away, nearly a three-hour drive and has one K-12 school with 176 students.

The Texas legislature provided the impetus for all school districts in Texas to provide on-going and follow-up staff development and services to school district personnel in support of serving students with disabilities in integrated settings. In 1995, a \$10 million general appropriations bill directed the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to use the regional education service centers as the primary providers for the implementation.

In the spring of 1996, the first step in developing Region 16's regional plan was to identify individuals to serve as focus group members. These stakeholders were nominated by 19 special education administrators representing 65 school districts and became the Focus Group Steering Committee. This group consisted of school administrators, general education and special education teachers, Region 16 staff, as well as representatives of The ARC, Texas Panhandle Mental Health Authority, Partnerships for Assisting Texans with Handicaps (PATH), Uniting Parents, West Texas A&M University, and the Texas Department of Health-Region 1. During this time, the Region 16 staff identified the need for an outside facilitator. The services of consultants from Stetson & Associates of Houston, Texas, were acquired.

The focus group met in February 1996 with a consultant and identified: (a) the most significant issues in meeting the needs of the diverse learner at the classroom, campus, and district level; (b) services and products most needed from the ESC to ensure continued success of the diverse learner in an inclusive setting; (c) services and service delivery characteristics offered by Region 16 found most helpful in supporting the diverse learner in inclusive settings; and (d) suggestions for changes in Region 16 services to support diverse learners in inclusive settings.

The next step was the development of a needs assessment survey, "Creating the Vision--Charting the Course," which was mailed to superintendents, special education administrators, and principals. They were asked to share copies with other appropriate personnel. The respondents were to rank: (a)

items identified by the focus group as important issues currently faced in meeting the needs of the diverse learner at the classroom, campus, and district level; and (b) the preferred service delivery model.

Some of the results identified were: (a) the need for specific "nuts and bolts," activity-based staff development in effective instructional strategies/methodologies to meet the needs of the diverse learner in an inclusive setting; (b) time for general and special educators to plan; (c) the need for advance planning and staffing prior to conducting an ARD; (d) the need for parents to be included as "team members" in the IEP development; (e) the need for a process to determine if existing staff are being utilized most effectively; (f) the need for building administrators to understand inclusive education, its philosophy, and support its implementation; and (g) the need for the use of innovative, instructional strategies/methods in inclusive settings to meet the needs of the diverse learner. The focus group preferred initial training to be held at the campus or local education agency (LEA) with follow-up visitations.

The focus group's survey asked the respondents to priority rank the services and products most needed from Region 16 to facilitate the continued success of the diverse learner in inclusive settings. High priority items included: (a) sharing of "best practices" regarding instructional strategies, behavior management, and teaching methodologies; (b) teacher/staff training with follow-up; (c) parent training; (d) teacher training presented jointly by special and general educators; and (e) continued payment of stipends for teachers and substitutes attending training.

The respondents were then asked to rank a list of priorities for summer training sponsored by Region 16. The top priority items included (a) co-teaching, (b) effective modifications for the diverse learner, (c) paraprofessional training, (d) effective use of staff, (e) building-level administration training regarding inclusion, (f) how to schedule support for students educated in inclusive settings, (g) behavior management, (h) training on how to include the medically fragile child, and (i) training general educators on legal issues.

Next, the respondents were asked to rank the priority of items the focus committee suggested as changes in Region 16 services needed to support diverse learners in integrated settings. The highest priorities were: (a) have Region 16 presentations include a "modified strand" showing how strategies/programs can be used with the diverse learner; (b) provide in-depth paraprofessional training regarding instructional methodologies, working cooperatively, and meeting specific students' needs; (c) continue summer pay for paraprofessionals and teachers attending training sessions; (d) provide on-site, intensive technical assistance for specific students; and (e) videotape teaching activities at inclusive education sites to develop a video library of "best practices."

The results of the needs survey were compiled by Stetson & Associates and provided the focus group with the necessary information on how to accomplish the TEA performance goals of: (a) develop capacity in all districts in the Region to serve students with disabilities in integrated settings; and (b) provide on-going and follow-up professional staff development and services to school district personnel in support of serving students with disabilities in integrated settings (R. Scott, TEA interoffice memorandum, December 6, 1995).

Method

From the survey results, the following components were identified as the framework for Region 16's service delivery model.

Cluster Site Training

Cluster site training was seen as the foundation for Region 16's plan. Campus and LEA training with follow-up was the preferred service delivery model for all of the critical issues addressed. It also required the most funding and personnel.

In 1996, six days of training were scheduled over a three-month period. Special education administrators were offered the opportunity for their districts to be host sites. Six cluster sites were identified with one site hosting two sessions. The sites were located throughout the Panhandle so travel time was greatly reduced for the attendees. The districts were requested to send campus teams comprised of an administrator and both general and special educators. Any other interested parties also were able to attend. The participants could attend sessions at any location. The target size for each site was 30 to 40 participants. To strengthen their commitment to this phase of the project, incentives were provided to the participants, including (a) payment of a daily stipend to each participant for training attended in the summer months, (b) reimbursement of substitute pay to districts whose teachers attended training during the school year, and (c) awarding teaching materials to each team whose members attended all sessions. Out of 44 campuses, 11 campus teams had all members present at all sessions. Region 16 contracted with Stetson and Associates to provide trainers for all the sessions. The participants gave high ratings to Stetson & Associates consultants and their materials and appreciated the stipends and substitute pay. A total of 215 teachers and administrators representing 44 campuses attended the sessions, including one campus with 100% staff participation.

During the summer of 1997, the cluster training again was offered to school districts and their staff. Six host sites were identified with two sites offering the training twice for a total of eight sessions. In response to feedback from the 1996 training, these sessions were consolidated to five consecutive days with all of the training offered during the summer months. Stipends were offered and Stetson & Associates provided the training and materials. A middle school campus had its entire staff attend the training, including office staff. A total of 313 administrators and teachers representing 39 campuses attended the 1997 sessions and provided high marks for the training.

The sessions held during the summers of 1996 and 1997 included the high priority topics originally listed by the focus group and survey respondents. The topics were:

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners: During this activity-based training, participants developed a common vocabulary related to inclusive education, identified a continuum of instructional settings and support needs, examined myths surrounding inclusive education and developed a philosophy for serving all students at their campus. Ten elements common to inclusive schools were contrasted with the current status of teams' campuses.

Support Models for Inclusive Education: Participants identified external and in-class models for supporting students in general education classes. Predictable issues arising from implementation of the models and strategies to address these issues were investigated. Participants discussed the different models of co-teaching and reviewed such practical issues as compatible philosophies, personality styles, teaching approaches, flexibility quotients, and personal "non-negotiables" as teachers.

Support, Staffing and Scheduling: This presentation reviewed information and practical tools for campuses to (a) determine the educational opportunities for implementing IEP objectives in the general education classroom, (b) determine the types of supports individual students need to be successful in the general education classroom, (c) investigate methods to determine the staffing needs to support students in general education classes, and (d) schedule staff for providing the required level of support.

ARD/IEP Process: During this session, participants conducted an analysis of the IEPs currently being utilized in their districts and reviewed them for "quality indicators." Additionally, participants discussed the appropriateness of targeted objectives.

Creating the Winning Classroom: Participants identified current behavioral challenges existing at their campuses and learned six strategies for providing a proactive approach to handling behavior issues on their campus.

Creative Solutions: Participants identified current barriers to quality inclusive education on their campuses and generated solutions to these barriers. In campus teams, participants rated their campuses in relationship to a "Best Practices Checklist for Inclusive Education" and developed an "Inclusion Team Action Plan."

Demonstration Sites

The next component of Region 16's plan involved campuses being identified as demonstration sites. The phrase "works in progress" was used to describe these campuses. As they further enhanced their efforts in educating students with disabilities into integrated settings, these campuses were entitled to receive: (a) year-long targeted, on-site technical assistance from Region 16 ESC; (b) in-depth training specific to individual campus needs; and (c) funds to attend conferences or workshops addressing inclusive strategies or on-site visits to other campuses with exemplary inclusionary practices. The demonstration campuses were responsible for (a) identification of campus needs related to inclusion, (b) development of a campus inclusion action plan based on and aligned with the campus improvement plan, (c) evaluation of progress completed on the action plan with ESC staff, (d) dissemination of information regarding inclusionary practices to their entire campus, (e) video taping of successful examples of inclusion on their campus, and (f) serving as an observation site for visitors from other campuses.

During the 1996-97 school year, six campuses were selected as demonstration sites. This group consisted of one high school, one middle school, one intermediate school, and three elementary schools. These same campuses requested to continue as demonstration sites during the 1997-98 school year at the Level II status. They continued to receive technical assistance but did not receive travel funds. The new demonstration campuses, Level I, included a high school, one junior high school, three middle schools, one intermediate school, and one K-12 school.

The individualized technical assistance for these campuses was well received. Each campus determined the type of technical assistance needed. This assistance included small group meetings with general and special education teachers, attendance at grade level team meetings, classroom observations with assistance to individual teachers or individual students, presentations at faculty and board meetings, and consultation with individual administrators to discuss staffing and scheduling concerns. Stetson & Associates consultants provided most follow-up visits, thereby providing a strong personal and professional connection to the schools.

Administrative Seminars

The third component of the regional plan involved administrative training. The focus group felt this was a key factor in successfully including students with disabilities into integrated settings at any campus. Training provided included (a) the summer cluster site training with campus teams, (b) Superintendent's and Principal's Fall Retreats in 1996, (c) Planning for Inclusive Schools-- Demonstration Sites Administrator Meetings, (d) Demystifying Inclusion: A Special Session for Campus Administrators, and (e) Techniques for Including Students with Disabilities: A Step-by-Step Practical Guide for Administrators.

Video Library

Developing a video library was the fourth component of the regional plan. Region 16 staff purchased a number of training videos now available for loan. Participants at several training sessions previewed books, videos and other training materials. Moreover, a resource guide for these materials was published and disseminated. Region 16, working with KACV-TV, the local public television station, produced a video showing promising inclusionary practices at schools throughout the Region 16 area. It is available for faculty, parent, and community meetings.

Cadre of Inclusion Experts

The final component of Region 16's regional plan involved the Cadre Training of Inclusion Experts. The special education administrators were asked to select both a general education teacher and a special education teacher who had attended the summer training to attend this specialized training on assisting their peers with inclusionary processes. The main emphasis was to make them aware of resources and materials available on inclusion and to develop a network of support.

In addition to the items listed in the regional plan, other types of support have been available to all districts in the Region 16 ESC service area:

1. "The ABC's of LRE"-- This newsletter was sent two times annually to the participants of the summer training sessions and all principals. Information concerning future training, campus highlights, and success stories have been included.

2. "Inclusion Alliance"-- These half-day sessions were offered each semester to elementary and secondary teachers. These were available to all districts and highlighted specific campuses that have been successful with their inclusion efforts or specific strategies. Practical applications of successful strategies were stressed with sharing of information on a teacher-to-teacher level.

3. Additional training opportunities have included (a) Differentiating Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms, (b) A New Look at L.I.F.E. (Learning in Functional Environments), (c) Content Mastery Training, (d) Using Cooperative Learning to Facilitate Inclusion, (e) Foundational Training for Paraprofessionals, (f) Working as a Paraprofessional in an Inclusive Setting, and (g) Solutions for Inclusion Confusion-- 1997 Texas Panhandle Middle School Association Fall Conference.

Results

In the development of the regional plan, Region 16 was asked to identify the evaluation design to be used. While a process evaluation was utilized to measure activity implementation, the major emphasis has been to determine the extent to which the districts served by Region 16 serve students with disabilities in integrated settings.

Baseline data from the demonstration campuses was obtained in the spring of 1997. Two instruments were used: (a) a faculty survey and (b) a statistical look at changes that have occurred at the campus level concerning student placement and the use of personnel for internal support. Stetson & Associates developed both.

The "Survey of Perceptions about Inclusive Education" was given to the entire faculty at the six demonstration campuses during the 1996-97 school year. The 26 items were ranked in the ranges of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The composite percentages of agreement are as follows:

Q1: Regularly plan together	43.8%	Q14: Knowledgeable of contents of IEP	76.9%
Q2: Together can solve any problem	78.7%	Q15: Total faculty feels responsible for all stud.	71.9%
Q3: Sufficient planning time	35.5%	Q16: Increased collab. between gen. ed. & sp. ed.	74.3%
Q4: Sp. Ed. integral members of faculty	66.5%	Q17: Increased sp. ed. support in gen. ed. classes	65.3%
Q5: Amt. of time sp. ed. in classes increased	67.9%	Q18: Increased ownership for all students	71.3%
Q6: Confident possess skills for diverse learners	74.0%	Q19: Increased comfort level for meeting diverse needs	58.3%
Q7: Predominant model is lecture	46.5%	Q20: Increased use of highly effective strategies	68.0%
Q8: Faculty uses variety of effective instruc. tech.	93.1%	Q21: Increased time for sp. ed. stu. in gen. ed. classes	85.3%
Q9: Stu. with disab. should receive serv. in gen.ed.	87.7%	Q22: Increased oppor. to interact with typical peers	88.5%
Q10: If parent, would want child to be in gen. ed.	75.3%	Q23: Decreased office referrals	44.6%
Q11: All benefit when stu. ed. in same classroom	78.3%	Q24: Increased success for sp.ed. stu. in gen ed. class	69.7%
Q12: Responsibility of sp. ed. to modify	79.8%	Q25: Increased achievement for sp. ed. student	68.2%
Q13: Responsibility of gen. ed. to modify	65.9%	Q26: Increased achievement for all students	58.5%

The survey results overall were very positive toward inclusive education even from respondents who had not attended the training sessions. Areas that need further consideration relate to sufficient planning time, providing special education support in general education classes, and meeting the needs of the diverse learner.

Additional data collected from the six demonstration campuses compared 1995-96 with 1996-97 services. The measurement tools examined:

- #1 Assignment of Special Education Personnel in the General Education Classroom;
- #2 Referrals for Special Education Services as a Measure of Increased Ownership;
- #3 In-Class Support and Home Campus Data;
- #4 Review of Changes in Time in the General Education Classroom for Special Education Students.

A summarization of the findings are listed in the chart below:

Demo. Campuses	% of staff providing in-class support '96 v. '97	# of minutes providing support in gen.ed. class per wk	# of referrals to sp. ed. '96 v. '97	% students receive sp. ed. support in gen ed. classroom '96 v. '97	% of increased # minutes in gen. ed. classroom
A	0 / 29	+ 810	Not reported	75.8 / 74.3	+ 76
B	0 / 67	+ 720	21 / 14	0 / 56	+ 56
C	0 / 63	+ 2,665	21 / 13	0 / 60.5	+ 50
D	75 / 44*	+ 320	15 / 10	66 / 87	+ 29
E	0 / 44	+ 30	10 / 8	0 / 67	Not reported
F	13 / 50	+ 5,160	24 / 11	6 / 46	+ 38

*Decrease due to the loss of a faculty position.

Positive results were shown in all categories. The data will be examined again during the 1997-98 school year to determine trends.

Discussion

The National Center on Education Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) found there has been a significant increase in the number of schools instituting inclusive educational programs. Moreover, positive educational results for both general and special education students as well as educators were reported. Similar results have been found in the Texas Panhandle. The statistical data shows the students are increasingly being served in the general education classroom with special education support. Anecdotal comments from faculty at the demonstration campuses list many positive experiences for the students, both general and special education, and for the faculty. An upcoming highlight will be at the "Inclusion Works! 1998" conference; two Level II Demonstration Campuses will be sharing the changes that have occurred with their students and staff that have been a result of the training and follow-up technical assistance offered by Region 16.

A greater impact has been possible by following the focus group's recommendations and providing intensive training and follow-up at cluster sites. Many of the participants stated that they were able to attend the training only because it was scheduled in their district. The rural nature of our service area demands the use of this model for effective staff development.

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The authors acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Frances Stetson, Donna Adams, and Martha Bissett-Drewyer of Stetson & Associates to this project. Their combined expertise has been an enormous asset to the success of our schools.